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ABSTRACT

Recurring questions on the discipline of speech communication include whether it is in fact a discipline, whether it justifies its own department, and what job prospects await speech communication graduates. These questions are not unique, but are taken very seriously by most administrators when evaluating speech programs. Reasons underlying most of these questions include inconsistent nomenclature and curricula and the rise of mass media related disciplines. Four megatrends, if fulfilled, will resolve such questions: (1) the nomenclature and the curricula associated with speech communication will become uniform from university to university, reflecting a consistent and systematic discipline; (2) the relevance of studying speech communication will be greatly enhanced by the growth of the "information society"; (3) speech communication programs will see a strong trend toward a career orientation and a gradual movement away from liberal arts orientations; (4) the position of speech communication will be strengthened as the discipline moves toward an even stronger service orientation. (HTH)

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MEGATRENDS IN SPEECH COMMUNICATION: ADMINISTRATION

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For

Association for Communication Administration

at

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AN ADMINISTRATIVE CONCERN:
WHAT IS SPEECH COMMUNICATION AND WHERE IS IT GOING?

During the past six years I have served as a department chair and/or a college associate dean. I have defended, represented, and fought for the discipline of Speech Communication with faculty, chair persons, deans, academic vice presidents, provosts, and university presidents. It has not always been an easy task. The following types of questions continue to pop up concerning our discipline:

(1) Is Speech Communication an academic discipline? If so, justify it as such.

(2) Does a Speech Communication curriculum build systematically from a theoretical base to more general applications of the theory?

(3) What kinds of jobs do Speech Communication graduates obtain when they leave the university?

(4) Does Speech Communication justify its own academic department or should it be one part of a Department of Communication?

(5) Should Speech Communication be only a university service program providing students with general education in courses such as public speaking, small group communication, and interpersonal communication?

These questions may seem simple, but they are taken very seriously by most administrators when they evaluate our programs. The answers to these questions weigh heavily on almost all administrative decisions at a university. If a Department of Speech Communication expects to receive proper space, equipment, travel monies, faculty salary monies, etc. then these questions must be answered to the satisfaction of university administrators. These administrators say, "Our university mission is to . . ." Then they ask, "Does your program and its cost fit our mission when we can't afford everything that is good?"

The questions are not unique. I wager that most of you have heard them before. I would like to propose some underlying reasons for these kinds of questions and then, as a soothsayer, predict four potential megatrends for the Speech Communication discipline.

The following reasons seem to underly questions about the Speech Communication discipline:

(1) Speech Communication is becoming lost at many universities because of inconsistent nomenclature and curricula and because the discipline seems to overlap too much with more generally accepted academic fields.

(2) Mass media related disciplines are better understood and perceived to be more relevant in our present inform-

ation society.

(3) Mass media related disciplines prepare students for specific careers while Speech Communication does not.

(4) Speech Communication is generally seen as a service area to the university and not an academic discipline.

There are likely many other reasons why our discipline's legitimacy is questioned. The four reasons I have stated are not inclusive, there are certainly other reasons for the questions. However, I feel that these reasons are major contributors to the questions about Speech Communication.

Given this background, I will now present four megatrends that, if fulfilled, will reduce the reasons for questions about Speech Communication and that have implications for the administration of Speech Communication departments.

Four administrative megatrends for the Speech Communication discipline:

(1) The nomenclature and the curricula associated with Speech Communication will become similar from university to University reflecting a consistent and systematic discipline.

(2) The relevance of studying Speech Communication will be greatly enhanced by the growth of the information society.

(3) Speech Communication programs will see a strong

trend towards a career orientation and a gradual movement away from a liberal arts orientation.

(4) The position of Speech Communication will be strengthened as the discipline moves towards an even stronger service orientation.

For the rest of this paper I will discuss why I feel these four megatrends will come to pass in the near future.

1. The nomenclature and the curricula associated with Speech Communication will become similar from university to university reflecting a consistent and systematic discipline.

Let me illustrate from my own experience why I feel this will become a megatrend. During the past thirteen years I have taught at four different universities. Even though, I am in Speech Communication, I have never taught in a department of that title. Two of the universities were state universities and two of the universities wereprivate. Each had extensively different college and departmental structures. More importantly, only rarely did the schools use the same names and or titles for their programs.

The names of the four colleges where Speech Communications could be found follow: two Colleges of Arts and Sciences, College of Communication, and College of Fine Arts and Communications. The four departments were titled as follows: Depart-

ment of Speech and Theatre, Department of Communications, and two Departments of Interpersonal Communication. Each of these departments claimsto be Speech Communication oriented. However, for someone out of our discipline to find out about Speech Communication by investigating the respective college catalogues is very difficult.

Further, the focus of each department was quite different. One department emphasized theatre as well as Speech Communication. The primary orientation of the program was toward speech performance with a very minimal emphasis on theory. The program was strong in the liberal arts. There was absolutely no discussion about careers in this department.

Another department consisted of five units: Journalism, Public Relations, Broadcasting, Human Resource Development, and Speech Communication. This department was completely career oriented with one exception. Speech Communication was trying to exist as a liberal art among four other strongly career oriented units. This department was so totally media career oriented, that central administrators wondered why Speech Communication should even exist when all it did was teach people to give talks and did not prepare newspaper writers.

Two other departments went by the title Interpersonal

Communication. They proudly claimed to be more forward thinking departments. One department focused on communication theory and offered a broad variety of courses in Speech Communication. The department was scientifically oriented. It emphasized research and theory. However, I always wondered why a department called Interpersonal Communication offered only one course in Interpersonal Communication. The other department titled Interpersonal Communication focused on interpersonal communication, small group communication, and public speaking. This program was not theoretical but primarily skills oriented. Use of the term Speech Communication was felt to give a negative connotation to the program. The faculty wanted to be known as interpersonal types.

We have all seen these kinds of programs and we can usually understand what each of these different departments is about. However, if you want a sobering experience try to explain and justifywhy these differences exist to an academic vice president who comes out of chemistry. This person might say, "If your academic discipline is Speech Communication, why are you trying to hide it behind all these other titles? If you really have a discipline why is there no consistency between universities?"

It is my belief that the continued questioning and misunderstanding among administrators at the upper levels

of our universities will lead us as Speech Communication administrators to force similarities between titles, curricula, and departmental organizations. We will do this to protect and justify Speech Communication as a discipline. If this prediction does not become a megatrend, I predict that Speech Communication will cease to exist as a strong and viable discipline.

2. The relevance of studying Speech Communication will be greatly enhanced by the growth of the information society.

We will no longer be thought of as only the Department of Debate or the Department of Speech, but as the department that teaches people how to communicate and to be human. As the information society leads us into the world of computers and hardware type communication, an even greater need for human communication will be present in our society. Machines are no substitute for the interaction and feeling of humans communicating with one another. As society demands more human interaction, where will it go to learn necessary skills? Hopefully, to strong Departments of Speech Communication. We must be strong and unified or society will go to other departments such as psychology, sociology, management, etc.

3. Speech Communication programs will see a strong trend towards a career orientation and a gradual movement

away from a liberal arts orientation.

University administrators compare Speech Communication graduates to other communication discipline graduates and the following question is asked, "What can a Speech Communication graduate do? Journalism graduates become newspaper reporters, Broadcast graudates work in radio and television, but we do not know what Speech Communication graduates do." As we try to answer this question we become accutely aware that Speech Communication does not prepare graduates for a specific career. We prepare our students to be creative, thinking, understanding, communicating human beings. Our students receive a very fine liberal education. However, we cannot say what their specific career will be. Other communication disciplines can.

Not only do administrators question the career of Speech Communication majors, but so do the students and their parents. The most common question asked by a Speech Communication student is,"What can I tell my folks I will be doing after I graduate?" Pressures from central administrators, students, and parents will lead our discipline to find and emphasize specific careers.

Not all departments will move toward a career orientation. However, I predict that the pressures for career will become so great that many departments will search out career

options. The liberal arts approach will always be accepted by some, but the career orientation must be dealt with.

4. The position of Speech Communication will be strengthened as the discipline moves towards an even stronger service orientation.

My feeling is that the strongest position a Department of Speech Communication can take is to service the university in any way possible. We must be actively involved in the general education programs of our universities. We should be teaching courses in speech, small groups, interpersonal communication, interviewing, etc. for students other than our own. We will gain support and appreciation from all segments of the university if we are willing to serve. I predict that our willingness to serve will grow. We need to impress central university administrators that we have much to offer. Because of this, in the future we will offer many more courses for non-majors.

In sum, to deal with the ever increasing questions of central administrators regarding the worth of our discipline, I believe that the discipline of Speech Communication will move strongly in four directions. There will be a systematizing of our discipline and its curriculum. There will be a stronger emphasis on the Speech Communication contribution to more effective human communication. There

will be a move towards a strong career orientation as opposed to a liberal arts orientation in Speech Communication. There will be more service to the university at large from Speech Communication. These trends will lead us to a position where we can more effectively answer the questions and criticisms of Speech Communication as a discipline.